"GOOD NEWS ACCORDING TO JOHNATHAN LIVINGSTON SEAGULL
Deuteronomy 14:26-30
Matthew 5:43-48

2/4/73

BETHANY PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
LAFAYETTE, INDIANA
JOHN M. BUCHANAN

The first mate on an ancient galley ship addressed his galley slaves one morning: ("Men, I have some good news and some bad news. First - the good news: the captain has ordered an extra ration of bread and grog for everybody. Now the bad news: the Captain wants to go water-skiing this morning.")

That's funny because the bad news is obviously a great deal worse than the good news is good. And in that respect the little story is not unlike our perception of the Christian Gospel. "Gospel" means "good news", and the news is good. In Jesus Christ God has acted to free us from sin and death because he loves us. In the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ we are reconciled to God. That's good! But the bad news is something else: we are sinners: even after God forgives us we continue to be sinners: we are vain, proud, egocentric creatures who can't do anything right. We deserve to go to hell: and furthermore our earthly life is full of temptations to stray from the straight and narrow path. One can't feel too good about oneself because that might be pride: one has to be careful not to enjoy life too much becasue that might be counted as the sin of the flesh - which we have been taught is highly suspect. The predictable result is that the bad news gets the headlines while the good news is kept down at the bottom of the page. If Christianity is fundamentally "good news" that's not very apparent, and Christians spend an inordinate amount of time feeling badly about themselves, or feeling guilty because good feelings keep interjecting themselves into what is assumed to be the proper level of morose and somber piety.

And yet, Jesus himself had an exalted (and very positive) view of man. He expected men to become more than they are, not less. He inspired men to do (more) and to be bigger and greater than they ever dared imagine was possible.

("You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly father is perfect".) I sense that we avoid that saying of his rather studiously. It strikes us as an unlikely thing for him to say, because for so long we have been taught that our first priority is to think badly of ourselves. We are to acknowledge our sin - not our potential: we are to prostrate ourselves in humility - not strive for excellence: we are to regard our bodies, minds and spirits with suspicion - not with an eye for their ultimate perfection. And yet that's

what he said to his disciples one day: right in the middle of that body of ethical teaching known as the Sermon on the Mount. ("You must be perfect.")

Now let's clear the air a bit. He did not mean flawless. That ought to go without saying - because he was dealing with a group of rather ordinary and flawed men. The disciples were no plaster-of-paris saints. They argued and fought, got jealous of each other: they were unfaithful at times, petty, self righteous: they could be violent, spiteful, vengeful, and hurting. That is to say, they were altogether human - which is to say imperfect. Yet he demanded that they become perfect.

He meant whole, total, complete. He meant that they were to become everything God had created them to become: he meant tht they should never be satisfied with what they knew was second-rate. He told them to be perfect as a conclusion to his admonition about loving enemies. And he meant just that: God loves all men equally: He has given you the abiiity to do the same. So be perfect - as he is. Nothing less will do.

I have hopes that our generation of Christians is beginning to recapture the uncategorical goodness of the Gospel: that we are in the process of turning around the recent history of somber, guilt-ridden piety that has become synonymous with Christian faith. I have hopes that we're beginning to understand that Christian Worship is essentially a celebration and that Christian life is fundamentally a thing of great love and joy and laughter. I have hopes that we are beginning to see that God thinks more highly of us than we have ever thought about ourselves: and that he expects us to become more than we ever thought was possible.

That, ~~I would suggest~~, is one of the themes of a remarkable little book that has been on the top of the best seller list for months now. Jonathan Livingston Seagull, by Richard Bach. The book is currently quoted by theologians, psychologists: a psychiatrist friend of mine is handing them out to anyone who asks. It is short - highly readable - and for anyone who has spent time watching seagulls - full of perfectly delightful pictures. The author makes no claims that his book is Christian in content: and yet the story of Jonathan has much to say to anyone who has reflected on the meaning of our Lord's admonition to be perfect.

I expect many of you have already read it: and I hope the rest of you will. In the

interim allow me to share with you the essence of the story.

Bach has dedicated his book ("To the real Jonathan Seagull who lives within us all.") ~~Which may be another way of saying to the Christ who said "You must become perfect!" to us all.~~ Jonathan was a remarkable creature. He was not content to spend his time pursuing the normal pursuits of seagulls, namely food and ~~rest~~ sleep. "Most gulls don't bother to learn more than the simple fact of flight - how to get from shore to food and back again. For most gulls it is not flying that matters, but eating. More than anything else, Jonathan Livingston Seagull loved to fly."

While the flock was chasing breakfast in the wake of a fishing boat Jonathan was at one thousand feet learning how to do a power dive. "Why, Jonathan?" his mother asked. "Why is it so hard to be like the rest of the flock, Jon? Why don't you eat? Son, you're bone and feathers."

And Jonathan would try for a few days, screeching and fighting with the other gulls around the piers and fishing boats. But he couldn't make it work and soon he'd be back up there learning that if he kept his wings stable in the power dive he could hit ninety miles an hour. That discovery led to near disaster as he spun out of control and smacked into the sea. But as he floated in semi-consciousness - after dark - he recalled that falcons could do what he was tyring to do with their short wings. So - up he went again - into the night sky, rolled into a dive at 2,000 feet with only the tips of wings extended, and hit one hundred forty miles an hour - under control!

Next morning he tried it from five thousand feet and hit terminal velocity - too hundred fourteen miles an hour - no gull had ever flown that fast! When he finally moved his wing tips ever so slightly to pull out of the dive he fired directly through the startled breakfast flock at two hundred and twelve.

"When Jonathan seagull joined the flock on the beach it was full night. He was dizzy and terribly tired. Yet in delight he flew a loop to landing, with a snap roll just before touchdown. When they hear of it, he thought, of the Breakthrough they'll be wild with joy. How much more there is now to living! Instead of our drab slogging forth and back to the fishing boats, there's a reason to life! We can lift ourselves out of ignorance, we can find ourselves as creatures of excellence and intelligence and skill. We can be

free! We can learn to fly!"

His euphoria was short-lived, however, as the flock, gathered in council called to him to "stand to center" for shame: "for reckless irresponsibility: for violating the dignity and tradition of the gull family", the Elder gull intoned. He was banished forever from the flock. "One day you shall learn that irresponsibility does not pay...we are put into this world to eat, to stay alive as long as we possibly can" And they turned their backs on him.

So he spent the rest of his days alone -learning, growing, flying: and "what he had hoped for the flock he now gained for himself alone: he learned to fly, and was not sorry for the price he had paid. Jonathan Seagull discovered that boredom and fear and anger are the reasons that a gull's life is so short, and with these gone from his thought, he lived a long and fine life indeed."

Then one day two beautiful silvery gulls came and took him away to a different world and Jonathan assumed he was in heaven. He learned even more about flying - and more importantly, at the feet of the Elder Gull, learned that he could be whatever he wanted to be. He was taught that the most fun of all - the most powerful force and beautiful experience was knowing the meaning of love and kindness. and sacrifice.

Eventually Jonathan assumed the leadership of this new flock but he longed to return to earth and to try again to share what he had learned with his brothers. Because now he had grown to love them.

flying alone

When he returned he discovered Fletcher - an outcast gull who was in the same predicament he - Jonathan - had been in so many years ago. He gathered six others and taught them all he knew about flying and about life. And together they made the decision to try to teach the rest of the flock.

Flying

When they flew in formation through the flock and took up their lessons on the beach they gathered quite a crowd: curious on-lookers, offended traditionalists. A young gull with a broken wing came forward - and Jonathan healed him with the words "You are free!" The crowd grew larger and Jonathan kept telling them and showing them what they could become. And when he brought Fletcher back to life after he had slammed into a cliff at two hundred miles an hour the flock closed in. Some said he was the Son of the Great Gull. Others said he was the Devil. 4,000 gulls with eyes glazed, beaks sharp, moved in to destroy.

they did have to restricted

Jonathan, Fletcher and the others escaped. And Jonathan puzzled: "Why is it that the hardest thing in the world is to teach a gull that he is free, and that he can prove it for himself if he'd just spend a little time practicing? Why should that be so hard?"

And the story ends with Jonathan vanishing into thin air, and Fletcher Seagull returning to the flock to face a brand new group of brave outcasts who wanted to learn how to fly.

Richard Bach hooks us with all that familiar material that sounds like a praphrase of the life of Christ. The one gull who is different, who comes into the world to teach other gulls, who gathers several followers and is persecuted and expelled from the flock. And it's a pretty good paraphrase - but I don't think that's the point. And it's not the reason why I have shared much of the story with you. For me the story asks questions about my life and my faith and my response to this Lord who said to his friends - and through them to me - "You must become perfect."

It drives me back to a consideration of the basic matter of Christian Faith - that bedrock of belief upon which everything else must rest. It forces me to consider the meaning of salvation - that most basic and most misunderstood of religious ideas.

It takes me back, for instance, to Israel: to that ragged tribe of slaves down in Egypt, somehow persuaded by Moses that they ~~ought to get~~ had it in them to get together and go North to something called a promised land. With the Egyptians hot on their trail they made it across the Sea of Reeds - and the Egyptians did not. They were free. God saved them that day. But a lot more happened to them than simple deliverance from the very real danger of the Egyptian Army. They were saved from that, of course. But in the process they were forced to become a nation - a people - a tightly knit society with a purpose and a future.

The Exodus - and principally the deliverance at the Red Sea - is that primal event by which men came to know God as Savior. And it's a serious error not to see that to be saved meant to become something none of them had any right even to imagine they could become.

It keeps driving me back to Jesus who assurred us that we no longer have to fear death - who, that is to say, saves and delivers us from our greatest anxioty and oldest enemy. But who kept insisting that release from that fear could become the fertile soil for new life: that men who were thus saved could become new men - bigger and better and fuller men than

they ever imagined -- even perfect men.

God wants us to be everything we can become. → Perfect - that is to say — He wants us to enjoy the life he has given: to exploit the resources he has put at our disposal: to throw ourselves into our lives, holding nothing back: loving totally, giving it all: being the best minister, school teacher, accountant, homemaker, fireman we can possibly be, and loving every minute of it. God wants to be free to see beauty - to hear loveliness - to see the rich potential in each other and to love each other for what we are and what we can become.

Jonathan Livingston Seagull achieved a kind of perfection because he was a singularly courageous bird. And what his author forgot was that will and courage alone isn't enough for us. Rather, what we can become has to be called out of us.

A current theologian put it this way:

> "Man cannot free himself:
> he must be set free,
> and this can happen only because
> God has given himself for us in
> Jesus Christ.
> This saving act of God, however,
> is not in the distant past,
> for the liberating event takes place
> when a man responds to the word of
> the cross by deciding
> to understand himself as
> Crucified and dead to his own past
> and open solely to the future
> opened to him in the word."
>
> Paul van Buren
> The Secular Meaning of the Gospel

There can be more to life than slogging forth and back from the fishing boats: there can be purpose and excellence and joy and freedom . . .

What we can be - that secret perfectability - that seed of new life is hidden deep down inside us, under layers of boredom and guilt and the everyday sameness of our busy lives. * Love calls it forth. Love is the water to make it grow. The love of each other - but supremely the love of God - a love big enough to die for us.

God sees us for what we are: God knows what we can become: and that is important enough to God to warrant the giving of his Son..

"Be perfect" Jesus said.

"Help me, said Kirk, wobbling across the sand, dragging his left wing...'Help me' he said in the way the dying speak.

'Come along then,' said Jonathan. 'Climb with me away from the ground and we'll begin.'

'You don't understand. My wing. I can't move my wing.'

'Maynard Gull, you have the freedom to be yourself, your true self here and now.'

'Are you saying I can fly?'

'I say you are free."

As simply and as quickly as that, Kirk Maynard Gull spread his wings, effortessly, and lifted into the night air. The flock was roused from sleep by his cry, as loud as he could scream it, from five hundred feet up; ('I can fly! Listen! I CAN FLY!" AMEN

We would fly, father. We would become everything you have created us to become. Help us through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN

The quotations are from Jonathan Livingston Seagull, a story, by Richard Bach: The Macmillan Company, New York, New York, 1970